DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 062 353 TE 002 906

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TITLE Accountability English Style: Dialogue, a Two-Way street, The Cards on the Table.
PUB DATE Feb 72
NOTE 5p.
JOURNAL CIT California English Journal; v8 n1 p7-11 February 1972

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Community Responsibility; *Educational Accountability; *English Instruction; *Language Arts; Parent Teacher Cooperation; *School Responsibility; Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Responsibility

ABSTRACT

The accountability of the English teacher is discussed from the standpoint of who they believe they are accountable to and who is properly accountable to them. The English teacher is said to be accountable to his students, his colleagues within and outside his discipline, to the parents of his students and to the larger local community which supports the schools, and to state, national, and other local groups. Those who are said to be accountable to the English teacher are the students, the parents, administrators, and the wider communities. It is concluded that it is the English teacher's obligation to take up an active role in clarifying for himself, his students, his colleagues, and his several communities what he is trying to do in the educational process, what conditions he needs in order to have a chance of success, and what means may be used to evaluate that success. (DB)

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ED 062353

California English Journal

FEBRUARY, 1972 • Vol. 8, No. 1

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Accountability English Style: Dialogue, a Two-Way Street, The Cards on the Table

A Position Paper from the Central California Council of Teachers of English

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(This paper developed from the Central California Council of Teachers of English Curriculum Study Commission special invitational conference April 3-5, 1971; edited at the Asilomar Language Arts Conference XXI, September 24-26, 1971. Richard Worthen and Florence Cohen, Co-Chairmen.)

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English teachers have always been accountable in the sense that they have formulated long-term goals and immediate objectives with concern first for their students, and second for their colleagues and the many communities — local, state, national and world — to which they have a recognized responsibility. They have been willing to communicate their aims and the outcomes of their teaching. This willingness has motivated the publication of libraries full of books and papers on goals and objectives in English, on the art of English instruction, and on the evaluation of such

instruction so that teaching could be appropriate to the learning situation.

Apparently ignoring these activities, which represent the professional commitment of thousands of thoughtful teachers, proponents of the "educational engineering" approach make such sweeping statements as, "The product of our educational process has never been evaluated." In questioning the appropriateness of the metaphor which equates a student and his educational progress with a "product," English teachers take serious issue with the idea that evaluation has not always been a fundamental part of their daily ministry to their students.

"But," say the educational engineers, "we want to know the cost per unit of learning. Therefore, we wish teachers to state their goals and objectives in terms of the behavior of their students at the completion of instruction, and we wish these results to be quantifiable."

Are Results Predictable?

English teachers, mindful of the old saying about doctors of medicine that a quack is one who guarantees results, wish to forestall quackery in education by pointing out that there is no way of guaranteeing the results of any instruction, just as there is no way of guaranteeing the results of medical treatment. The doctor can foresee the results of the chain smoker's behavior and can advise him to give up smoking, but the physician is not, in fairness, to be held accountable if the patient lights up in the corridor as he leaves or at the bar on the corner with his friends. No more can teachers force behavior on students or control the society in which they move. No one can predict what a child will learn or when he will learn it. Who but a charlatan would venture to guarantee any particular behavior of human beings?

English teachers affirm that education is that process which provides opportunities for new experiences to the learner, experiences which he encounters and assimilates until new learnings become part of his repertoire for dealing with his own life experiences. However, it would be destructive to assume that these learnings are acquired in some simple manner. Literalists who presume that neat and simply worded objectives can be attained fail to understand that learning is not always linear and logical but is often unpredictably simultaneous and physchological.

The art of teaching lies in the teacher's ability to perceive the student's needs and to arrange optimal environments for extending his range of experience. Often these needs will arise or can be cued to arise at about the same time for a number of students so that group instruction can take place, but just as often the student's needs will be unique, so that the teacher's skills will be called upon to deal with each one's needs individ-

ually. In some cases a student's need can be fulfilled by a few seconds of class time taken to answer a puzzling question; in others, even years of trying to understand his problems and helping him to solve them may not be enough. The goals of teaching when they relate to student needs are impossible to predict as to kind, duration, or outcome. Attempting to force teachers to predict the needs and preconceive the outcomes can only lead to misunderstanding by the public of what the learning process *is*.

Well-meaning people who do not understand this aspect of education mistake a necessary tentativeness and openness to improvisation for confusion of purpose, inadequate teaching skill, or a failure of the will to teach. Ironically, even though more students are entering college better prepared academically than ever before, and teachers are providing a wider opportunity for a greater number of students, schools are being confronted with a demand to be "accountable" because of an *implied* failure, a superficial broadside being leveled in these times at other political and social institutions as well.

Is the English Teacher Accountable?

In the face of such popular misconceptions, English teachers want to say plainly (1) who they believe they are accountable to, and (2) who is properly accountable to them.

The English teacher is first accountable to his students. It is his obligation to be aware of the full range of his student's needs. He is responsible for communicating with his students and for using all his expertise as a teacher and as a person to provide a variety of language experiences. He is continually responsible for apprising them of their progress in appropriately challenging activities.

Next, the English teacher is accountable to his colleagues, both within his discipline and outside of it. Within his discipline he is responsible for taking part in a continuing professional dialogue that clarifies his perceptions and procedures for his fellow teachers in English. He is responsible for testing his ideas against those of others, including ideas which he discoveres in publications and other media. This dialogue provides the forum within which methods and ideas can be tested for their validity and usefulness. It is the means by which the teacher continually renews himself professionally.

Colleagues in other disciplines form the next circle of accountability. They should understand what the English teacher is doing not only because they are a group who do much to disseminate information and atti-

tudes about English teaching to individuals and groups outside of the teaching profession, but because they too have a stake in what the English teacher is trying to accomplish.

English teachers are next accountable to the parents of their students, and to the larger local community which supports the schools. Again the English teacher perceives this accountability in terms of a dialogue in which parents and community representatives should participate actively with teachers both in the determination of the purposes of education and in the understanding of what is happening in the classroom.

Last, the English teacher is accountable to the more distant levels of community, such as other local, state, and national groups — educational, political, business, and social. Dialogue at these levels is most effectively carried on through the professional organizations designed to promote and protect the welfare of English teaching and the discipline of English as a whole.

The basis of a workable accountability at all of these levels is honest dialogue. In the past, the framework for such a dialogue did not exist, and the dilemma the total community faces now about its schools can be — in part — attributed to its absence. If English teachers could have afforded in the past to avoid this dialogue with other participants in the educational enterprise, they can no longer afford to do so, for this luxury of detachment has been destroyed by the conditions and tensions that exist today. Today's realities demand dialogue, and English teachers need to be a part of it. Indeed, by talent and training, they are ideally suited to initiate it.

Who Is Accountable to the English Teacher?

Just as important as the English teacher's accountability to his students, to his colleagues, and to the communities at all levels which have a responsible interest in his activities, is the accountability of each of these groups to the teacher of English. First of all, students are accountable to the teacher of English for being active participants in the learning process. Parents are accountable to the teacher of English for the out-of-school hours of their children. They must supply a nurturing environment which permits the student to come to school in a teachable condition. At the same time, because of the unique vantage point from which they can witness the learning patterns in their children, parents can be valuable colleagues of the teacher of English in developing appropriate learning programs. If they understand the implications, they will join with English

teachers to resist any mechanistic attempt to consider their children identical "product units."

Administrators and others who provide the school climate are accountable to the English teacher for protecting and fostering the teaching process. The wider communities are accountable for providing the financial, cultural, and social support for carrying on the education of children in English subjects.

What Must the Teacher Do?

These mutually accountable groups must be made aware of the folly of expecting teachers to make some prior guarantee of student performance. It is therefore now the English teacher's obligation to take up an active role in clarifying for himself, his students, his colleagues, and his several communities, just what he is trying to do in the educational process, what conditions he needs in order to have a chance of success, and what means may be used to evaluate that success.

English teachers insist that they must be the interpreters to the public of the purposes of English instruction and of the terms for describing its results. They believe that they can most clearly explain the necessary and desirable changes which have taken place in English classrooms in recent years.

Rather than trying to state unrealistic goals and objectives which cannot be met, English teachers can delineate the kinds of experiences they plan to provide for their students so that parents can understand the program. More meaningful ways of evaluating the success of English programs than "immediately observable behavior" or "objective tests" are many and varied: for example, tapes revealing patterns of language development, files of sample papers, quality and quantity of reading, attendance at plays or other cultural events, or evidence of a positive, critical attitude toward the media.

English teachers believe that they are now, and always have been, accountable for the results of their instruction, taking into account the conditions under which they have been expected to work, the social and cultural climate of the schools and the school systems in which they have taught, and the state of the civilization of which they and the other members of the educational enterprise are a part. Now it is the duty of English teachers to foster a deeper understanding among all people who have a stake in the educational process.